DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 121 EA 027 341

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TITLE School and Family Collaboration: Parental Involvement and Student Success at a School in Texas.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Elementary Education; *Parent Influence; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; *School Activities; School Community Relationship; *Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how parents and the school can work together to improve educational outcomes. It describes collaborative community-involvement strategies used at Gerard Elementary School in Cleburne, Texas. The school offers a meet-the-teacher day at the beginning of the school year, a parent-orientation night, and parent-school conferences. Parent volunteers serve on the advisory council and help to plan school activities. If a parent does not come to a school conference, school staff will make a home visit, sometimes bringing an interpreter. Parent volunteers have been valuable in promoting multicultural activities, building a playground, developing a music and art program, establishing a before-school student-activity program, and strengthening the Parent Teachers Association. (LMI)

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School and Family Collaboration:

Parental Involvement and Student Success at a School in Texas

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We are Gerard Elementary School in Cleburne, Texas and we identify with Kentucky Fried Chicken. They claim to do "chicken right." Our goal is to do students right. To do this we have sought to involve our total community in the education of our children. We include parents, businesses, and citizens as a total package in doing what is right for them. We believe in a strong collaborative process, working together to create the success for students that we have been privileged to enjoy. But, yesterday's successes are never enough. We must keep on, continuously working together, to improve our outcomes for today and tomorrow.

Before school starts each year we sponsor a "Meet the Teacher Day." At this time we post the rosters of which children will be in each class for the year. The parents and children anxiously await the opening of the doors for "Meet the Teacher." Excitement runs high as parents, students, and teachers fill our halls with laugher, smiles, and calls of, "WELCOME BACK!!!" Participation is optional, but almost all our parents come and bring their children for this afternoon of fun and excitement as everyone gets to know each other, gets free "Hugs in the Hallways" from the principal, meets their new teacher, gets another hug, finds their new desks, brings their supplies, and can even buy a lunch ticket, in this no pressure, afternoon before the hecticness of the first day of school.

Soon after school begins we follow up our "Meet the Teacher Day" with a Parent Orientation Night. As an unusual quirk, on this

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evening we encourage parents to leave their young children at home, and to come for an intense night of actually sitting down with their child's teacher without the distraction of little ones. Here they learn the specifics of our campus mission, our goals for both the campus and their child, the teachers's policies for homework, tests, and grading, as well as our campus expectations for academics, attendance, and behavior. We even go over our school bus rules! On our campus we strongly feel every child may not be capable of making straight A's, but every child <u>is</u> capable of learning to become a good citizen. During Parent Orientation each parent has the opportunity to ask questions, set up individual parent conferences, and become familiar with all campus opportunities including extracurricular. If a parent does not have anyone to leave their children with for this serious and important evening, we provide babysitting free of charge. It is our way of showing how committed we are to each family having a clear understanding of our focus for the year for their child.

The participation and feedback from this program are both excellent. Since it is held during the evening, parents arrive early to get a good parking place within a block of the school! New and transfer student parents have been particularly complimentary of this program whereby teachers get truly specific with their goals and expectations, alleviating miscommunication down the line.

Parent conferences are <u>not an option</u> at Gerard. If a parent does not come to a conference, <u>we go to them</u> with a home visit. Sometimes we even take an interpreter with us to make sure we can

communicate with a non-English speaking parent. In each instance the non-English speaking parent has been so impressed and touched that the school would go this extra step to help their child succeed in school. Each time we have been graciously extended hospitality in their home, no matter how meager that home may be. They are encouraged by with our effort and our diligence as well as our concern.

Visit Gerard on any day and you will see parents actively involved in the education of their children. Through our V.I.P. (Very Important Persons) program each classroom teacher has a minimum of one parent volunteer. This includes our E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) class which has two volunteers!! The parent may assist with tutorials, provide guided practice, assist with small groups, put up bulletin boards, run off papers, or simply listen to a child read. This is particularly effective with a child who has no one to listen to him read, or even talk, at home. The V.I.P., complete with his or her apple name tag, can reinforce skills as well as generate positive reinforcement that every child needs and deserves. The V.I.P., as well as the total school staff, actively works to make each child feel special, unique, and appreciated.

Our parents help us in other ways. Because our school is not blessed to have a music teacher, we have parent volunteers on each grade level who come into the classrooms and volunteer their time helping to provide music instruction. They help also by playing the piano in preparation for and during our programs. We guarantee

each child an opportunity to be on the stage, to be a young star, at least twice a year. At Gerard we feel every child is a star and deserves the opportunity to shine. Besides, if they do not have the opportunity at school, many would not have another chance.

We realize our parents have various skills and career knowledge that most of our children are not routinely exposed to. Therefore, we utilize our parents to bring career and cultural programs into the classrooms. Our local community theater recently brought their production of "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown" to us so every child, regardless of economic background, could have the opportunity to see it. We promote multiculturalism by utilizing our parents in such programs as "Life in China" and the implementation of after school Conversational Spanish classes. Some of our students can't speak English, so we, the adults, are getting help learning to speak Spanish! We have stressed career and life skills utilizing parents such as ecologists, quilters, ethnic restaurant owners, horse breeders, magicians, square dancers, and even a crazy man dressed as Christopher Columbus who claimed he docked the Mayflower out front, right next to the principal's Honda!

Christopher was remarkably well preserved... He visited every class in the school, responded factually and creatively to questions, and delighted everyone.

We also have utilized parents and other community members who are physicians to come discuss many different topics including AIDs education and Attention Deficit Disorder with both our staff and

students. Our parents and community members also assist us on our campus Advisory Council. There they lend guidance in our campus based management and goal setting. Our parents thus have input on everything from curriculum and instruction to the planning and implementation of extracurricular programs such as Grandparents Day, the Talent Show, Western Day, Safety Patrol, our Book Fairs, our district's Academic Fair, and our Texas Museum projects. They also serve as helpers on campus field trips and with many Student Council activities. Being a Gerard parent becomes a lot of work because we always have <u>something</u> going on!

Not only do we utilize our parents brains and technical skills, we also utilize their muscles. Each year our parents help us construct our float to participate in the community wide Homecoming Parade. This year we won third place! You've never seen so many black and gold pie pans as we put on that float! Last year we had over thirty fathers and two mothers, (one being the principal!), who gave their Saturdays for over four months to build a new playground for our campus. When the district did not fund the project, our parents got behind it, and built it themselves! Our children sold snowcones on Fridays to help fund it, and many community businesses either gave donations or materials or let us have supplies at cost. When the project was done, the parents had a sign constructed for the playground that say, "This playground was built by Gerard parents. We love our school!!!" In these days when you hear so much negative about the public schools, it is wonderful to work in a place where the parents says, "We love our

school!"

Our parents are also great about seeing a specific need on our campus and filling in the void, often at tremendous costs of time and personal sacrifice. Besides the playground, two additional examples of this are our Art Club and our Early Risers groups. Besides not having a music teacher, our campus also has no art teacher. One of our mothers comes at 7:30 once each week for Art Club. She organizes and runs it. Any child that is interested in art may attend. There are no fees or dues. Our campus activity fund picks up the cost for supplies and our mother plans the hands-on art projects. She lets us know what she needs to get the job done. We provide it.

The same is true of our Early Risers. A set of parents saw a need for something constructive for the large numbers of little children who were riding the bus and arriving unusually early for school. They were having to just sit in the cafeteria awaiting the start of the school day. It is very difficult to keep these children still for so long, as well as being incredibly boring for the children to just sit there. So these parents sought permission to begin Early Risers. Early Risers, which also meets weekly, now runs over 100 children per session, and is completely led by parents and students as they teach children songs, do fun skits, role-play, and have stories all designed to instill basic values, positive study habits, love for all mankind, positive self-esteem, and pride in our school. It's worth getting up early for! They also sing each year in our Talent Show and are the largest group on

stage! This year they plan to incorporate sign language they have learned in Early Risers with their Talent Show performance.

Now you can see why we are so proud of our parents! They see a need, they organize, and they produce success...all for the benefit of our students!

One last group of tireless hardworkers for our school is our Parent Teacher Association. Our PTA goes the second mile giving back of themselves to our campus. Each class has a homeroom mother separate and apart from the class volunteer. The homeroom mother does more than plan parties. She is responsible for the largest networking system in the school. She takes the responsibility of keeping each family in her room aware of every PTA sponsored activity or effort. She will also individually contact by phone, mail, or direct contact, each family for any important thrust on campus, such as testing. The PTA provides a parent volunteer to stay with classes so teachers can leave early for staff in-service training. They see to it that we have wonderful Teacher Appreciation Luncheons, Back to School Luncheons, and monthly treats in honor of the teacher's birthdays. They spearhead fund raisers, bake cookies and cakes for every conceivable event, provide many, many additional classroom and campus resources, and show their support of the V.I.P. program by also honoring the volunteers with an end of school Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon held in the school library. As you can see, food is a great reward on our campus! Finally, each month the PTA prints and distributes our campus newsletter, the "Bear Tracks," which provides families

with a letter from the principal, a copy of the monthly calendar of all school events, brief summaries of fun classroom activities, examples of children's poetry and stories, PTA information, and sends out cries for help when we have a specific need in a certain area! If nothing else gets the job done, the "Bear Tracks" will! Currently, we are searching for the donation of an additional good, used piano. We know sooner or later someone will come through and we will get our piano!

In the 1970s Helen Reddy sang a lovely song that was written for her daughter. She called it, "You and Me Against the World." At Gerard we believe in that precious bonding between parent and child, but we take it one step further. We have excellent student success in academics, attendance, and behavior. We feel that is because we seek to bring the school into that family circle of success. We do not believe it is the parent and child against the world, but the family, school, and community working <u>together</u> every day to be, "You and We <u>For</u> the World!" In our society today with an epidemic of chemical abuse, gangs, drive-by shootings, and sexual freedom, it is absolutely necessary that we work together to give our next generation the strength of character it must have to make wise, informed decisions and the courage to stand by them. It is more then reading and writing. It is being prepared to lead our world tomorrow.

School and Family Collaboration: Our future depends on it.